

Fashion Ontology, researching the possibilities for knowing through an expanded fashion practice

Undefined borders between artistic practices dominated the XX century. The need to name and organize arts was perpetuated not only due to methodological reasoning but also to perpetuate the status quo and associated hierarchies. The inevitable dialogue between Fine Arts and Applied Arts was redefined and inevitably changed. It is through the subordination of fashion to a Post-Duchampian understanding of what fashion practices are, that this paper will concentrate on discussions surrounding definition of fashion.

The aim of this chapter is to voice the concerns of fashion practitioners/researchers in the early 21st century, testing the boundaries of the discipline. Interdisciplinary and wide ranging, this 'paper-as-installation' fills a gap in practice-based-research, bridging practice and theory. The research methodology developed within the practice extends the potential of film, communicating between practice and theory in order to explore the possibilities for knowing through expanded fashion practice, in a context of heightened concerns about climate change and environmental issues induced by mass-production, fast-fashion, and global fashion distribution and consumption. Therefore, challenging the understanding of fashion, not just as accomplished garments, but instead as the production of new philosophical and theoretical conditions in which the discipline can further adjust, evolve, and challenge in socially and environmentally responsible ways. Deconstructing underlying assumptions and exposing the limitations of current market-driven fashion design processes.

Introduction: Practice-based artistic fashion research

Artistic research, unlike other academic models of research, produces knowledge based on the experience of the practice of an artist. As such, methodologies are less well established. The rationale for using particular methods and procedures in discovering and recording research information are often questioned, and there is still a propensity to view artistic knowledge as less academic. My practice, as other artistic practice-based research practices, is particular to the way I work and as such cannot be transmitted by models based on repetition as in scientific research methodologies. However, the emphasis on the singular and unique in the aesthetic domain does not imply that research is impossible: 'after all, artistic research does satisfy a number of fundamental research criteria, such as a focus on communication, a (self) critical attitude, and an emphasis on autonomous research' (Balkema and Slager, 2004:13). Although the artistic researcher's practice is one that is singular, the research methods used to explore it and the practitioner's reflection can be disseminated via the practice itself and through the practitioner's written reflections. The research findings are generalizable because they offer other practitioners a way to reflect upon and explore their own practice. Based on this understanding, I have been using

my artistic fashion practice as a way of questioning the meaning and knowledge generated in contemporary fashion research practices.

In this chapter I will argue for the validity of fashion artistic research practice that is part written document and part film, presented as a tool to be critical of 'assumptions, preconceptions, and givens' about fashion (similarly to how Dunne and Raby have questioned critical design practices). The practice-as-research form cannot be channelled through traditional rigid academic-scientific guidelines (that is generalization, repeatability, and quantification); instead, it engages in the qualitative and the unique, therefore it requires spaces and methods other than the traditional ones, such as museum/exhibition venues and, in my own practice the use of film.

My research practice utilizes a post-structuralist approach that emphasizes 'how' things mean, and what thoughts they stimulate; it affirms the plurality of meanings obtained by things being re-read by new people in new contexts. As a practitioner, I believe that fashion is about much more than describing, analysing, and recording. My artistic process is non-linear, complex and allows for a multiplicity of views, which can grant access to knowledge previously ignored. Considering that the term interpretation comes

from the Latin *interpretatio* means "explanation" and derives from *interpretas* a negotiator or translator or go-between. Interpretation is then a kind of explanation inserted between one text or agent and another (1991, Bordwell: 1).

If 'no knowledge is direct', all knowledge derives from interpretation; as Bordwell asserted 'meanings are not found but made' (Bordwell, 1991:1-2). From the Philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstructed understanding emerged a new epistemology of reading that 'did not aim at destroying the text, but at shaking up its unity and individuality' (Bjørnar, 2006: 88) to reveal its many different functions, forms and facets, as an intricate structure or network made from several connected items, including quotes from other works. Although Derrida himself, was referring mostly to literary text, this is also applicable to meaning in film or fashion. This change in the understanding of meaning marked more than an interpretative turn, it 'involved an ontological rupture (...) since any strict division between the world and the text was denied' (Bjørnar, 2006: 88). I believe that a unique criticality is necessary for the fashion field of studies that has often been judged to be futile, superficial and shallow, one that is now facing a dramatic environmental and ethical crisis that has finally led to fashion gaining a consciousness. Practice-based research is by definition empirical. However, my process seeks to extend fashion practice methods by placing greater emphasis on reflection and writing. Experimental systems and experimentation in research are the predominant method used within this chapter as a way of exploring unanswered questions, not with the intention of finding an answer but of finding new ways to pose questions via a creative practice.

Film as research method for fashion: meaning-making

The theorist Mieke Bal coined the phrase ‘thinking in film’ (2013) to describe what artists, critics and artworks accomplish in their interactions with each other, with ‘film’ as a ‘set-up’ suitable for putting forward critical questions. Artworks ‘embody’ and ‘put in-place’ questions, in the phrase ‘thinking in film’, Bal states that the preposition ‘in’ is used to indicate location, inclusion or position:

“in” means “by the means of” (a tool) and implies spatial positioning: “within”. Thinking beyond ordinary boundaries and going into other, new, unheard-of spaces are of vital importance to sustain the conditions of a functioning political domain (Bal, 2013: 7).

Film in my practice – as in Bal’s understanding of ‘thinking in film’ – is not merely a recording method. Film lends itself to also being a ‘thinking tool’, which is ultimately utilized in the questioning, communication and dissemination of ideas.

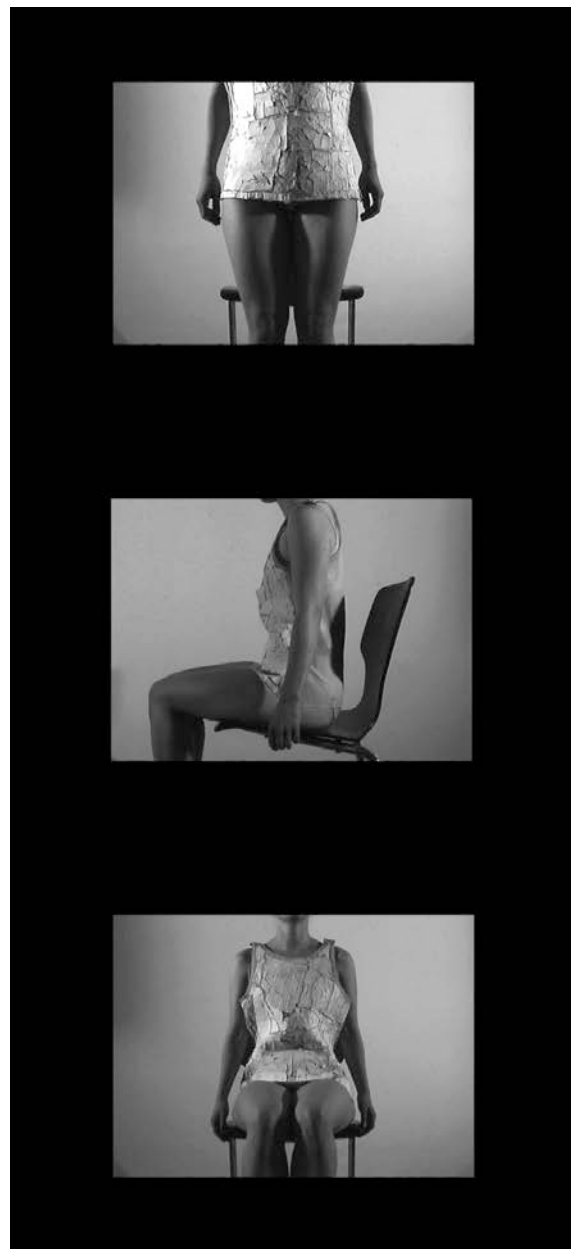


Figure 1

I first started using film as a way to communicate my thoughts about fashion in 2008, in a short film titled 'Fragment' (See Fig.1). In this short, single continuous shot film, the unidentified main character is getting dressed in a porcelain garment. By the end of the scene, the character sits down and the garment breaks, emitting the sound of shattering porcelain. Film is used here as a tool at the service of a fashion, to understand fashion itself – far from fashion's market-centred nature, conveying an interrogation via the filmed object. The idea conveyed relates to the temporary nature of fashion, its transience; by having the garment fragmenting as the centre of the action, the attention is focused on the body's movements (getting dressed) but ultimately in the end it is the sonic moment of the ceramic breaking that gathers the most attention from the audience for its absurdity, as well as the garment's inadequacy for being worn. The Philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests that 'technology is a method and mode of doing' but also 'a mode of revealing' (1977); often, during my making process, I have found myself surprised by the reveal of the process itself: driven by an accident that happened in studio while working with materials that led to the realization that latex and porcelain, when bonded together, would form a double layer that would not break entirely but would endlessly fragment, so this realization led to this video. By playing back the film as an endless video loop, the garment continues to break forever – an allusion to fashion's constant reinvention and decay mechanisms, where a trend appears and fades out only to be replaced by another – evoking death as a central part of fashion itself, as if mimicking human condition. Artist and theorist Rebecca Fortnum describes the artistic process as 'processes of the unknown' (2013), connecting them to Heidegger's understanding of how the art-making process 'conjures challenges that the artist responds to' with practice. In my practice-as-research, what film offers is a form of thinking through these ideas of fashion's transience, memory and frailty. When I made my first film, it was a way to document a fault - a garment made of porcelain that would break when worn - but also, it was a form of communicating what I had been thinking about fashion's own transience via moving images. The way I think through film utilizes its openness and ability to generate meaning.

Ways of knowing, through practice

Historians such as Pamela H. Smith, Professor of History at Columbia University, have recently turned to practice as a way of knowing. Among some of the recent cross-contaminations, *The Making and Knowing project* (2014-2019) focused on looking into an intriguing anonymous sixteenth-century artisanal and technical manuscript:

The manuscript codifies procedures that were not meant to be reproduced solely through the act of reading, but were rather an invitation to imitate and experiment.

In her writings, Smith discusses how artisans and artists have often referred to the 'inadequacy of words' in translating practice; she mentions

A remarkable development in European history (...) commencing around 1400, during which craftspeople and practitioners, used to looking, learning, and practicing on the shop floor, suddenly transformed their lived experience and embodied – often tacit – knowledge into writing and compiled it into texts (...) Many well-known artists, such as Cellini and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), began to document their techniques via writing (Smith, 2016: 211-213).

In testing the techniques described by the artisans in their writings, Smith's team developed a way of experiencing their methods through practice, which allows them to access knowledge while questioning notions previously out of reach for historians. The relevance of practice to this project made noticeable how this exchange of views that is currently taking place may translate into an impactful paradigm change for knowledge in the twenty-first century. Within the last 20 years, we have been witnessing a change within academia towards the acceptance of artistic practice-based research with, among many relevant contributions, Henk Borgdorff's 'The Debate on Research in the Arts' (2006), as well as Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsoo Eds (2010) 'The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts' just to name a few. However, there is still reluctance in accepting its methods and methodologies. According to the music theorist and professor in art theory and research Henk Borgdorff (who has published extensively on the rationale of artistic research), one of the most controversial pieces of research in arts and design is based on understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts; after all, there are 'no art practices that are not saturated with experiences, histories and beliefs' (Borgdorff, 2006: 7). Thus, artistic research, unlike other academic models of research, is knowledge based on the experience of the practice developed by the artist/practitioner. In the next section, I will describe the rationale for using particular methods and procedures that I have adopted in discovering and recording my own research's information.

The epistemological question of practice-based fashion research: what does it mean to know by making fashion?

Practice allows making sense of the world through in-depth engagement with creation,

by creating an object one creates knowledge: knowledge about materials and techniques, and often also knowledge about distribution and consumption. How then does an object, especially one in which craft articulates the process of making, constitute conditions of knowledge as well as knowing itself? If making is knowing, can its conditional base be separated and evaluated independently? Are craft techniques, the communal structures of craftspeople, the sociability of crafting, and the consumption of crafted forms to be seen as conditional for the generation of knowing? (Lehmann, 2012: 159-160).

Lehmann's questions seem to be essential to thinking through fashion, as it is impossible to separate the craft from the definition of what fashion is. Even in the etymology of the word 'fashion' itself, the word relates to the Latin *factio*, meaning 'making' or 'doing,' as such, to 'unmake' fashion carries in itself a paradox; in my practice the term 'unmaking' is both a metaphorical undoing and a methodological one, a practice of fashion resistance by not producing clothing, a deconstruction of fashion in order to understand what it's made of – like unpicking the seams of a jacket in order to analyse its construction. My research practice attempts to de-construct underlying assumptions regarding a transition to post-productivism, exposing the limitations of current market-driven fashion design processes.

What is an Ontology of Fashion?

In light of his fundamental ontology, Martin Heidegger interprets Aristotle in such a way that *phronesis* (and practical philosophy as such) is the original form of knowledge and thus primary to *Sophia* (and theoretical philosophy). Tradition extending back to Greek antiquity distinguishes theoretical knowledge from practical knowledge which comes to us via Aristotle, through the concept of the *episteme* (intellectual knowledge) contrasted with *tekhnê* (practical knowledge) required for making (*poiesis*) and doing (*praxis*). In the 20th century, this opposition was thematized in analytic philosophy as being between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', between knowledge and skill. In his article *Making as Knowing: Epistemology and Technique in Craft* (2012), Ulrich Lehmann writes that 'knowledge of a process does not necessarily imply the conscious awareness of *episteme* - of how knowledge itself is acquired and constructed' (Lehmann, 2012: 151). Much has been written about the tacit nature of practical knowledge. Most notably, Michael Polanyi's theorized 'tacit knowledge' as arising from 'skilled practice at a time when all knowledge within the university was considered explicit and recordable' (Polanyi, 1966/2009:4/5), and proposed a simple definition of tacit knowledge as 'knowledge that cannot be told' (Polanyi, 1966/2009:4-5). The majority of authors writing on knowledge in art and design identify the foundation of tacit knowledge as 'knowledge that cannot be told', or 'knowing how' but not 'reflecting the breadth of ideas explored' (Polanyi, 1966; 2009: 4-5). Ulrich Lehmann states that:

Knowledge of a process does not necessarily imply the conscious awareness of an *episteme*—of how knowledge itself is acquired and constructed. If making is knowing, it does not follow that all makers "know" their craft. They might know how to produce an effective, economical, or detailed result. But this does not mean that they can change completely, reverse, or deconstruct their *tekhnê* in such a way as to challenge established thinking about this craft (...) An exclusive inquiry into technique can leave narratives and symbolic meaning stranded; but, dialectically, it can fulfil an auxiliary function that is required to complete the reading of an object and thereby approximate knowledge about its actual (or first) principles (Lehmann, 2012:151).

It is true that 'knowledge does not imply a conscious awareness of an episteme', but what about when it does consider its own construction, or even deconstruction of the thinking about your craft? What implications does a philosophical understanding of practice-based knowledge have? Practice-as-research offers the possibility of more layered, complex dimensions of fashion, where 'object has finally become subject', the 'becoming-subject of the object' (Marchetti & Quinz, 2007:6-9). An epistemologically equal footing between fashion theory and practice allows for a proximity between making, thinking and wearing, since it is now widely understood that knowledge may be produced through 'doing' as well as observing, allowing for the understanding of fashion in all its complexity as per Kawamura in his 'fashion-ology' (2005) where 'It is difficult to deny the connection between fashion, that is an immaterial object, and clothing, that is a material object ... Fashion is a belief that is manifested through clothing (Kawamura, 2005).' Knowledge is a combination of facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; it is both the theoretical and practical understanding of a subject, therefore it is sometimes necessary to rethink its epistemology. The epistemological question is what kind of knowledge is produced through fashion practice? What practice may allow is for making sense of the world through in-depth engagement with creation, by 'creating an object one creates knowledge: knowledge about materials and techniques' (Lehmann, 2012). From the perspective of my own practice, using film in the creation of reflective fashion images allowed me to convey subjects that were harder to portray through traditional fashion media. The possibilities that overlaying text and a visual time-based medium allowed for a visual narrative translation of fashion's complexities. The making of garments allowed me, as an artist, to think through my craft about how sometimes garments were reproducing human nature by their transient nature or through embodying the diversity of personas one human might contain, the historical relations, political positioning was often misread, the openness of fashion as medium didn't do much of the questioning of such representations. In containing the garments onto my own critical narratives, I have tried to still have fashion's openness of reading but operating in a narrative that I conduct, where I can guide the spectator into my own questions. The audience to my films might try or not to respond to the questions posed but my intention is to guide the audience to the questions, not the answers. The reflective medium of writing forces me to analyze and discuss my own intentions when I create a garment, film or text. I often have to confront my own intentions and discuss them with others, which offers a critical perspective over my artistic practice, even though there would not be an easy possibility of transmitting my own model of practice via repetition, there is within artistic practices, the possibility of, on one hand learning by copying, reproduction and on other hand, through the writings the possibility of discussing ideas that, in the past, have been enclosed within practitioners own approaches and never brought into the open for disagreements, or even just for thinking together, as a discipline with a multiplicity of voices. There is in the tacit knowledge blanket, the barrier of an inability to create our own ontologies of fashion practice, were we discuss our own views on being

and fashion. The nature of fashion is one that cannot be separated from being, hence all the sociology perspective in the last 30 years of fashion writings but the voice of the practitioners can only be manifested through their practice. My concern with a fashion ontology, is with what are characteristic products, processes and experiences an in which presented through the materiality of the medium and if what is presented that transcends that materiality. I partially rely both on Borgdorff's understanding of artistic research (2006) and Clemens Thornquist, Professor of Fashion Design at the Swedish School of Textiles at the University of Borås, in both his articles 'Material Evidence: definition by a series of artefacts in arts research' (Thornquist, 2015) and 'Basic Research in Art: Foundational problems in Fashion Design Explored through the art itself' (Thornquist, 2014). In these works, Thornquist explores theoretical levels of art practice where art is understood as the function of *tekhnê*. In my own research, what I present are not material artefacts but film, which are intended to act as visual cinematic discussions of fashion. As Thornquist clarifies,

Design and dress, some foundational ontological and logical dimensions of the art form may need to be developed. One may, for example, think of this as when new words and grammar in a formal language first need to be developed in order to make it possible to explore a particular issue from a different perspective. Thus, the need to understand and express an issue that is a main concern of another academic field may also be the motive and inspiration for a basic research in the art; however, the actual foundational development of the art discipline is the construction of definitions and models for the theoretic advancement of the field itself. Nevertheless, the crucial ontological and logical aspects of an art form presented here demonstrate the "pure" aspects of any art: basic research in art, defined as the foundational development of the art for the sake of the art itself' (Thornquist, 2014: 54).

Ontology concerns the nature of being and becoming, and the entities that may be said to exist or not. Thus, ontological issues are about fundamental categories of form, substance, matter, subject, and their relationship to each other (Thornquist, 2014: 42). Ontology is often confused with epistemology, but epistemology is easy to separate because it is the study of knowledge itself, in the sense of how we know what we know. According Thornquist

From the perspective of an art form such as fashion design, the ontological problems are therefore about when something is, or is becoming, e.g. a dress, a garment, a coat, a seam, a pocket, a fashion, etc. (Thornquist, 2014:42).

Ontology is also about the organization of knowledge, hierarchy, and division of fundamental entities of existence and reality in the broadest sense, but equally about the organization of, and relationship between, fundamental entities in particular knowledge domains.

Ontologies of Fashion through practice-based artistic research

An understanding of knowledge developed through research practices requires a vernacular that allows for a deeper understanding of current fashion practices and what they mean and stand for. Exhibitions such as 'The state of fashion' (2018) in the Netherlands and 'Transfashional' (2016 - 2019 Warsaw, Vienna, London, Kalmar and Rimini) have brought to light how the role of fashion designers, researchers and artists working through fashion has changed into a hybrid process that merges these different disciplines and questions fashion knowledge itself. My installation piece (See figure 2 and 3), as proposed for Transfashional Warsaw (from 19 May – 04 June 2017) at the Centre of Contemporary Art Zamek Ujazdowski displays a dialogue between a number of my films. Within each film (made in 2011 and 2016), I had approached layering meanings via montage, but by screening the films side-by-side a multiplicity of meanings appeared. I was inspired by this juxtaposition's implications about how knowledge can be generated by a fashion practice and what an ontology of fashion could be.





Figure 2 & 3

In the installation, 'Unmaking' (2016) and 'An impossible Wardrobe for the invisible' (2011) plus a very short loop sequence of hands sewing (taken from 'Unmaking') are presented side-by-side in a three screen installation piece. The film 'Unmaking' (2016) seeks to deconstruct preconceptions about the relationship between body, clothing, production and consumption. Intended as a means of reflection and resistance, the film refers to a post-productivist condition of fashion by exposing the limits of production driven by overproduction within the increasingly global market of the 21st century. My practice-based research often debates the role of the fashion designer and questions fashion's critical agency. Since 2005 I have been creating collections conceptualizing processes of fashion making, but also opened discussion about fashion industry's ceaseless overproduction/overconsumption systems. My reflective and radically critical stand brought me to a decision to orient practice in a more activist and artistic direction, producing mostly videos, films and texts which pled for a change of ways in which fashion system operates today. The 2011 series of short films entitled "An Impossible Wardrobe for the Invisible" presented six different stories of "creation through destruction" (see figure 4). In each of six films both male and female performers would wear a wardrobe created to be destroyed, outfits which dissolve as they get in contact with water. Simultaneously this acts of "disappearance" become moments of creation: what remains as traces of fabric and contours marked by seams and stitches, becomes effectively a new "garment", unique and unreproducible. The symbolic weight of this gesture of erasure is the reasoning behind my work, an appeal for

stopping and reflecting about why and how to make fashion for the future. Online in the catalogue of the exhibition, the curator wrote about my work in the following words:

UK based artist Lara Torres asks the viewer to stop and reflect about how we make fashion in the future in her video-essay 'Unmaking'. The visual narrative is composed of a series of performative gestures, such as un-weaving, un-sewing and tearing apart in order to become aware of the symbolic meaning of the thread, of the fragment, and of all what remains behind as a material trace of human existence (Denegri, 2016).

For the exhibition's catalogue, the curator, Dobrila Denegri , proposed the following questions:

'Can art and fashion respond to current social, economic, cultural and environmental urgencies and shape new paradigmatic positions? Transfashion explores the ways in which artists and designers are engaging and contributing to these questions' (Denegri, 2016).

The artist's response to Denegri's questions was a way to answer or contribute to these questions via their practice. My own answer, the film installation , is an exploration of multiple moving-images juxtaposing fashion-related gestures, from buttoning a shirt to knitting a jumper, to sewing and getting dressed in many layers. Although the film's sequences are body centred it depicts a complexity of what composes fashion itself. In the last sequence of the film 'Unmaking', text appears in the form of subtitles. This text brings another layer of meaning, relating to fashion in a deeper way by describing a scenario from post-war Bosnia. The text describes how numerous bodies of the dead had to be identified by their personal belongings – their garments, watches or pieces of jewellery. This

brings a heavier tone to the film while positioning the work, and fashion, in its relation to death and the human condition. In this sense, the film attempts an ontological take through the form of a visual essay that considers the making of fashion, not only in its gestures and procedures, but in its

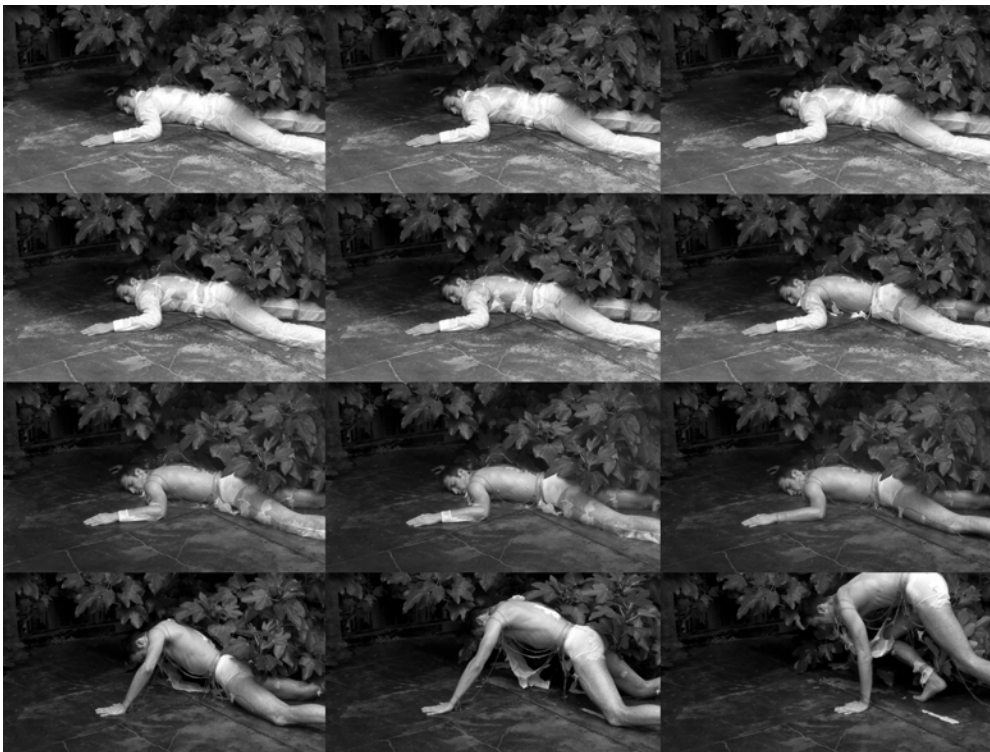


Figure 4

intrinsic relation with human beings as the ultimate function of communicating and representing who we are to others. In my hybrid research practice, between art, fashion and film, interdisciplinarity has been a tool for questioning. It is in working through film that I enact my questions about fashion. My concern with fashion ontology, its characteristic products, processes and experiences which are presented through the materiality of the medium and what is presented that transcends that materiality.

Discussion: Towards the development of poetics of fashion

Epistemology is the philosophical field revolving around (the study of) knowledge and how to reach it. One might say that it includes the ontology of knowledge. The understanding of a knowledge generated through fashion practices may be possible through a combination of craft, construction and reflection upon practice - an ontology of fashion practice will necessarily include instances of 'becoming fashion'. Representational mediums such as fashion and film necessarily depend upon their disciplinary guiding principles and critically of their own deconstruction. This piece of writing does not ambition to be conclusive but, if nothing else, to spark conversation around these crucial themes, that moving forward need further exploration. I believe that Aristotle's notion of poetics, can be useful to expand our notions of what a fashion ontology can be

Poetics derives from the Greek word *poiesis*, or active making. The poetics of any artistic medium studies the finished work as the result of a process of construction—a process that includes a craft component (such as rules of thumb), the more general principles according to which the work is composed, and its functions, effects, and uses. Any inquiry into the fundamental principles by which artifacts in any representational medium are constructed, and the effects that flow from those principles, can fall within the domain of poetics (Bordwell, 2007:12).

In his poetics Aristotle considers that unreflective experience can have the same results as *tekhne*, as the ability to understand it does not depend on understanding it, writing a poetics is not the same as writing a do-it-yourself manual. But what it is, is an attempt driven by the desire to understand. In my own practice, since its beginnings, focused on the need to understand 'what' fashion is and 'how' fashion is. As I come to the end this chapter, my invitation to the audience/reader is to move into the position of the maker through the use of *go-pro* cameras in a studio setting, offering a view of the poetics of becoming fashion. A *GoPro Hero* is to be used in a studio setting to improve understanding of making mechanisms. So far I have recorded video footage of actions, such as getting dressed and sewing using a GoPro camera in order to evaluate and develop a video presentation in lieu of a written report (see figure 4).

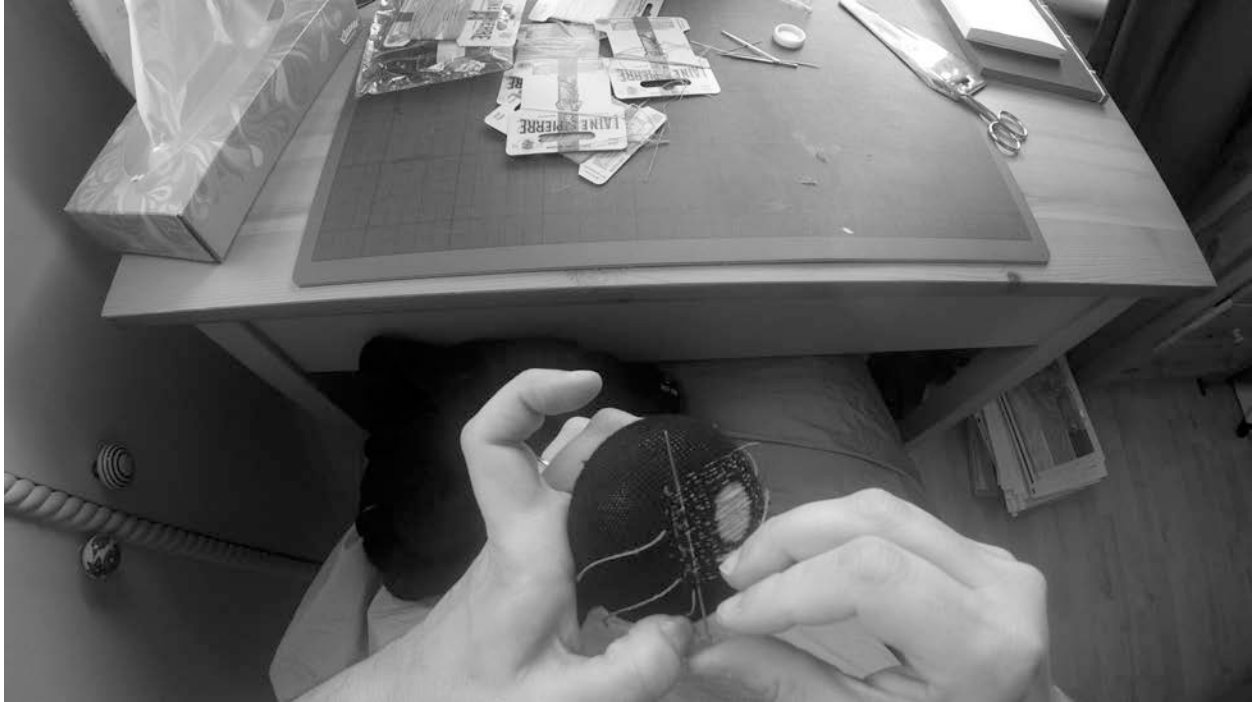


Figure 5

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Figure 3. Lara Torres 'An impossible wardrobe for the invisible', 2011 / 'Unmaking', 2016, installation view Transfashional Warsaw, Centre of Contemporary Art Zamek Ujazdowski Photo by: Bartosz Górka , 2017

Figure 4. Lara Torres 'An impossible wardrobe for the invisible', 2011, film stills © Lara Torres

Figure 5. Lara Torres 'Go-pro recordings', Portsmouth (2019-2020) © Lara Torres